

SAA 2026: “Power Dressing”

Abstracts

“Fashioning the Devil: Costuming, Race, and Reproduction in *The White Devil*”

Hannah Chambers

John Webster’s 1612 tragic dramatic retelling of the scandalous life and death of Vittoria Accoramboni uses the titular word “devil” almost 40. Of these appearances, approximately one-third correspond to either Vittoria or Zanche. In this way, in addition to having religious connotations, the “devil” of Webster’s play is often also a signifier of race and gender. This paper seeks to contribute to current scholarly conversations in Premodern Critical Race Studies (PCRS) by examining the constructions of Black and white womanhood in *The White Devil*, particularly through the metatheatrical uses of costuming and cosmetics, and the rhetoric of reproduction coupled with each of the women. Through close readings of three scenes in particular, I argue that the performance of such a play would have helped to construct certain portraits of racialized womanhood that were both unique from and adherent to conventions of dramatic race-making in the period. Additionally, turning to reproduction as the means by which this racialized gendering occurs, marks the women’s reproductive potential—despite their lack of physical children—as inherent to the ways these intersectional identities were understood and later legislated in the early Atlantic world.

“Armor and Starstone: Margaret Cavendish’s Defensive Dressing”

Hannah Hicks

Throughout her dramas and prose writing, Margaret Cavendish is enamored with the image of the woman warrior. *Bell in Campo* is one of her most overt militaristic-female fantasies, but her protagonists in several other works, including *Blazing World*, *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity*, and *Love’s Adventures*, all eventually engage in organized military action, and, more critically, don some form of armor to do so. Cavendish’s qualitative attention to armor, particularly the gendered construction of armor, is particularly prominent in *Bell in Campo* and *Blazing World*, in which elaborate military garb is created by female characters for their own use.

In this paper, I will discuss how Cavendish’s construction of not just literary female warriors, but literary female armor, is an advancement and at times a revision of the earlier Renaissance images of the armored woman. Considering the influence of literary figures such as Spenser’s Britomart and the historical myths of Joan of Arc and Elizabeth I at Tilbury, I argue that Cavendish combines the solitary, often crossdressed literary female knight with the recognizably female historical figures to generate not just a revision of the armored female archetype, but an entirely new image of the female militant. By both producing and reproducing images of women in armor, drawing from the medieval and Renaissance traditions but creating a visual design entirely her own, Cavendish attempts to remold the figure of the female knight not as a crossdressed or masculinized woman, but rather as an explicitly feminine embodiment of power.

“Power Dressing of Queens and Queans”

Kay Stanton

The modern construct of ‘power dressing’ derives from the best-selling 1975 book *Dress for Success*, by John T. Molloy, which advised job-seekers how to dress like they already had the position that they were pursuing. It primarily focused on recommended male attire, with only one chapter devoted to clothing advice for women, then under-represented in the business community.

However, in 1977, Molloy published a sequel, *The Women’s Dress for Success Book*. As he had told men, he recommended to women that they should wear a jacket, as a mantle of authority, and he advised that a woman’s attire, though including a skirt rather than slacks, should look somewhat mannish, underplaying curves. Following the advice of Molloy, who published additional sequels, women operating in various professional realms began to wear the recommended dark suits and plain, usually white blouses, with subtle jewelry. Some regarded the typical attire of British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to epitomize what came to be described as ‘power dressing,’ though costuming of female characters in films and television shows expanded the ‘power look’ to include increased use of color, styles, and accessories.

Female power dressing, in my definition, is the act of navigating through available economic resources and socio-political, gender-role, and sartorial restrictions and expectations to achieve self-expression by means of choice of attire. It results in making one’s body into a work of art that simultaneously establishes not only that one belongs in a particular social setting but furthermore is a leader in it and a self-confident focal point, compelling rather than fearing or eluding both the male and female gaze. My paper will analyze power-dressing of both actual women and female literary characters: specifically queens, who have ample resources and need to compel recognition, and ‘queans,’ courtesans, who have the financial necessity to draw customers.

“Dress and Self-Fashioning in The Second Part of *The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania*”

Valerie Voight

This paper explores the political implications of dress in The Second Part of Mary Wroth’s *The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania*. As part of a political struggle between Europe and the Ottoman empire that dominates the unfinished manuscript continuation of the *Urania*, Wroth juxtaposes her heroine Pamphilia, the “Easterne starr,” with a Christian sophy of Persia who attempts to reclaim her rightful throne from her usurping, pagan uncle.¹ Multiple critics have explored this doubling between the two monarchs, but no reading has yet explored dress as a site of political self-fashioning. In her descriptions of aristocratic women, Wroth focuses on details of dress and accessories in order to communicate virtue and status. This paper attempts to build on work by Bernadette Andrea and Sheila T. Cavanagh that examines Wroth’s characterization of both her Tartarian and Turkish characters. I read Wroth’s attention to the social and racial importance of dress alongside Patricia Fumerton’s conception of the “trivial selfhood of the aristocracy”² and Wroth’s own experiences with dress as self-fashioning at the Jacobean court.

¹ Mary Wroth, *The Second Part of The Countess of Montgomery’s Urania*, ed. Josephine Roberts, Suzanne Gossett, and Janel Mueller, (ACMRS, 1999), 132.

² Patricia Fumerton, *Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament* (The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 1.